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“The Chorography of Colonialism in East Africa and the Waves of Revolution in Abdulrazak Gurnah’s Novel Afterlives.”

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Abstract

“Literature” reforms and reframes any society because it is the pulse of a nation’s culture, tradition, customs, etc. Books are the powerful tools through which any corrupt system can be toppled down. This article aims at the chorography of Colonialism in East Africa and the waves of revolution illustrated in the 2021 Nobel Prize Winner Abdulrazak Gurnah’s novel *Afterlives*. Why should we still talk about Africans and their Sufferings in 2021? “Black Lives Matter & Justice for George Floyd” became a clarion call all over the world and the death the black man George Floyd shook the conscience of the Whole World. Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *Afterlives* was published after the death of George Floyd though the book does not have any direct reference to George Floyd’s death, it echoed the plight of Africans in general and the cruel treatment given to them by the Colonizers even in the 21st Century. African literature has a rich history and it is as old as the Ancient Egypt and hieroglyphs, or writing which uses pictures to represent words. These Ancient Egyptian beginnings led to Arabic poetry, which spread during the Arab conquest of Egypt in the seventh century and through Western Africa in the ninth century.

Key Words: Colonization, Oppression, East Africa, Revolution, etc.

“Literature” reforms and reframes any society because it is the pulse of a nation’s culture, tradition, customs, etc. Books are the powerful tools through which any corrupt system can be toppled down. This article aims at the chorography of Colonialism in East Africa and the waves of revolution illustrated in the 2021 Nobel Prize Winner Abdulrazak Gurnah’s novel *Afterlives*. Why should we still talk about Africans and their Sufferings in 2021? “Black Lives Matter & Justice for George Floyd” became a clarion call all over the world and the death the black man George Floyd shook the conscience of the Whole World. The gruesome murder of George Floyd took place in America in 2020. It became the hottest ticket across the globe and all the TV Channels, News Papers, Social Media exemplified the heinous and merciless murder of a Black Man by a few American Cops. On May 25, 2020, Minneapolis police officers arrested George Floyd, a 46-year-old black man, after a convenience store employee called 911 and told the police that Mr. Floyd had bought cigarettes with a counterfeit \$20 bill. Seventeen minutes after the first squad a car arrived at the scene, Mr. Floyd was unconscious and pinned beneath three police officers, showing no signs of life. Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *Afterlives* was published after the death of George Floyd though the book does not have any direct reference to George Floyd’s death, it echoed the plight of Africans in general and the cruel treatment given to them by the Colonizers even in the 21st Century. African literature has a rich history and it is as old as the Ancient Egypt and hieroglyphs, or writing which uses pictures to represent words. These Ancient Egyptian beginnings led to Arabic poetry, which spread during the Arab conquest of Egypt in the seventh century and through Western Africa in the ninth century. Hieroglyph is a character used in a system of pictorial writing, particularly this form was used on ancient Egyptian monuments. Hieroglyphic symbols may represent the objects that they depict but usually stand for particular sounds or groups of sounds. Hieroglyph, meaning “sacred carving,” is a Greek translation of the Egyptian phrase “the god’s words,” which was used at the time of the early Greek contacts with Egypt to distinguish the older hieroglyphs from the handwriting of the day (demotic). African Literature is fundamentally a literature of rebellion. It has a lot of significant characteristics like Slave narratives, Protests against Colonization, Calls for independence African pride, Hope for the future, Dissent, The clash between indigenous and colonial cultures, Condemnation of European subjugation, Pride in the African past, and hope for the continent’s independent future. Africa experienced several hardships in its long history which left an impact on the themes of its literature. Colonization left a massive impact in the lives of Africans. The British literally ruined the African Culture. The Islamic religion, which the Arabs carried with them, spread from North Africa into many areas south of the Sahara, so that many western African people are now largely Islamized. Abdulrazak Gurnah, a Zanzibari Arab writer settled in the United Kingdom, has been declared the winner of this year’s Nobel Prize in Literature for his works on colonialism and the lives of refugees. Abdulrazak Gurnah was born in Tanzania (Tanganyika and Zanzibar), where Gurnah comes from. It was a part of German East Africa in the 19th century. After World War I, it was taken over by the British. This region is known as the Swahili coast, stretching from the present-day Somalia to Mozambique on the western shores of the Indian Ocean. Gurnah portrays the impact of colonialism in the lives of the Africans down the ages in his novels. East Africa is the locale for most of his novels.

For centuries, traders from Arabia, Persia and the Indian subcontinent mixed with local Bantu populations to give rise to a new culture and language called Swahili. The word 'Swahili' comes from the Arabic word 'Sahel' or coast. Cities and islands such as Zanzibar, Lamu, Malindi, Mombasa, Kilwa and Sofala were prosperous due to the maritime trade and intermingling of races and cultures. The cosmopolitan and melting pot heritage of the Swahili coast forms the backdrop of most of Gurnah's novels. In all his work, his own background is a culturally diversified island in the Indian Ocean, with a history of slave trade and various forms of oppression under a number of colonial powers – Portuguese, Indian, Arab, German and British – and with trade connections with the entire world. Zanzibar was a cosmopolitan society before globalization. The area was later visited and colonized by European colonial powers. These African and Arabic cultures continued to blend with the European culture and literature to form a unique literary form. His debut novel, *Memory of Departure* written in 1987 is about a failed uprising and it is based in Africa. His second work, *Pilgrims Way* written in 1988 explores the multifaceted reality of life in exile. The protagonist, Daud is confronted with the racist climate of his new homeland, England. His third novel, *Dottie* (1990), is about a black woman of immigrant background growing up in harsh conditions in racially charged 1950s England. She feels rootless in England and attempts to create her own space and identity through books and stories; reading gives her a chance to reconstruct herself. His novel *Paradise* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. The 2021 Noble Laureate in Literature Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel *Afterlives* is a gripping narrative which illustrates the major Post-Colonial themes like oppression, genocide, rebellion and the impact of German colonial rule in Africa in the early 20th century. The Word Chorography means the systematic description and mapping of particular regions. It is true that Abdulrazak Gurnah has shown a panoramic view of East Africa in his novels vividly. The German military forces leave the land ravaged and drenched in the blood of those who have been senselessly and callously slain. Gurnah says about this in the book, Ba [their father] had sugar [diabetes] and was unwell and could not work. Perhaps the neighbors helped them. I know my clothes were rags and I was always hungry. Ma lost two of my younger sisters after they were born. I expect it was malaria but I was only a child and I would not have known about things like that at the time. I remember when they both came. After a few months they fell ill and cried for days before they passed away. Some nights I could not sleep because I was so hungry and because Ba was groaning so loudly. His legs were swollen and smelled bad, like meat that was rotting. It was not his fault, that was the sugar. Don't cry, I can see your eyes are getting wet. I am not saying this to be unkind but to explain to you that perhaps these were the things that made me run away" (AL 36–37). Even the native soldiers were trained by their colonial oppressors to kill and brutalise their fellow Africans on command. Gurnah changes the focus from violence and bloodshed to a small coastal town which remains unnamed. It has somehow managed to overcome the never-ending conflicts. This is the home of the protagonists—Halifax, Ilyas and Hamas whose lives are interconnected. By narrating these stories of the oppressed and their small triumphs in the face of overwhelming adversity, Gurnah takes an important step to explain the erasure of those who have been brutalized and left voiceless. *Afterlives* are a brilliant and a stirring saga of hope. The novel *Afterlives* (2020) is like most of Gurnah's work set within a wider East African area than his native Zanzibar and. Gurnah's characters here lead a low-key lives, but they are described not only compassionately but with interest, evoking the complex and difficult circumstances and their restricted choices. The book was first published by Bloomsbury Publishing on 17 September 2020. It was set mainly in the context of the first half of the 20th century; the story highlights four protagonists living in an unnamed town on the Swahili coast of what is now Tanzania from the time of the German colonial rule until a few years after independence. The novel delineates the plight of Africans during the German rule in their country and the untold sufferings they underwent in their hands. [T]he empire had to make the Africans feel the clenched fist of German power in order that they should learn to bear the yoke of their servitude compliantly. ... The colonial administration was strengthening its hold over the land, growing in numbers and in reach. Good land was taken over as more German settlers arrived. The forced labour regime was extended to build roads and clear roadside gutters and make avenues and gardens for the leisure of the colonists and the good name of the Kaiserreich. The Germans were latecomers to empire-building in this part of the world but they were digging in to stay (P 16). *Afterlives* tells the story of four main characters whose lives intersect with each other in love and kinship, and which are mounded by great forces beyond their control, principally the colonial tussle over the land they inhabit. There is an east African proverb that when elephants fight it is the grass that suffers. It is a story of the grass. Africa is a fertile country with a lot of natural resources. It is a repository of culture and ancient traditions but their culture is devastated by the Britishers. It is very difficult to say that the eternal servitude imposed upon the Africans is over. They are still ostracized in all walks of life. The killing of George Floyd, 46, of St. Louis Park — who repeatedly told a Minneapolis police officer he couldn't breathe as the officer knelt on his neck on May 25, 2020 sparked days of unrest in Minneapolis and St. Paul and mass protests across the globe over the treatment of Black people by police. Today "Black Lives Matter & Justice for George Floyd" has become a movement in America. It is this gruesome murder of George Floyd made Gurnah to recall his memory about his own people and the tortures given to Blacks all over the world. The major concern of Writers like Abdulrazak Gurnah is that there should be no more deaths like that of George Floyd's. "Black Lives do Matter" has become a universal voice against Slavery and Oppression as that of Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela in History. It would be most befitting to conclude the article with the immortal lines of Martin Luther King who states in his essay "I have a dream" about the plight of Africans thus, "... the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination."

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